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ABSTRACT

Today, contrary to Euclid's view of things as they are, people are told that the whole is greater than the sum of its parts. Nowhere apparently has the concept of the whole been ignored more than in the teaching of reading. The "see and say" (holistic) approach, introduced in the early fifties, still dominates the classroom. Readers and workbooks present selected whole words as equal to or the same as the sum of its parts accompanied by colorful illustrations for memorizing by repetition in contexts. In contrast, the systemic approach recognizes the parts of the whole within the word and their relationships to speech sounds. By definition, a letter is a significant speech sound within a language system. Systemic reading programs expose another of the hidden "greater" parts of the equation--word relationships within a statement. It may be that the holistic system fears that exposure of the hidden aspects of language will leave the learner forever processing words consciously sound by sound, syllable by syllable, or word by word. The systemic approach to the teaching of reading ensures that the learner becomes acquainted with the tools of the system and how to use them. And for the reader taught by both methods, their eyes and mind move across the printed page unhampered by information about how it all happens. (Contains definitions, a diagram, and a worksheet.) (NKA)

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Yes, But ... (An Invitation to Dialogue)--Holistic vs. Systemic Approach to the Teaching of Reading

by Dorothy S. Murray

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Until recently, comparatively speaking, the concept of an ancient Greek mathematician - THE WHOLE IS EQUAL TO THE SUM OF ITS PARTS - has gone unchallenged. It had been understood that two baseball players plus seven baseball players equalled nine baseball players. Right?

Wrong. Today, contrary to Euclid's view of things as they are, we are now told - THE WHOLE IS GREATER THAN THE SUM OF ITS PARTS. Now two baseball players plus seven baseball players equal a baseball team. To the whole has been added the organization of the nine players, their functions, and the conditions in which they operate.

...

Nowhere, in our day apparently, has the new concept of the whole been ignored more than in the teaching of reading. The SEE AND SAY (holistic) approach, introduced in the early fifties, still dominates our classrooms. Readers and workbooks present selected whole words as equal to or the same as the sum of its parts accompanied by colorful (distracting?) illustrations for memorizing by repetition in contexts. The immediate result of this approach is visible and uniform throughout the class.

In contrast, the systemic approach recognizes the parts of the whole within the word and their relationships to speech sounds. By definition, a letter is a significant speech sound within a language system. However complicated in application to written language, the fact can not be ignored or left to the gifted to figure out for themselves.

BUT ...somewhere in the transition from the old concept of the whole to the new, the parts that make up the whole possible have been ignored... almost as though their presence would diminish, if not demean, the art of reading. A program that introduces the sound/symbol relationship, for example, is dismissed as antiquated and irrelevant, a matter to be left to linguistic scholars.

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Systemic reading programs expose another of the hidden GREATER parts of the equation - word relationships within a statement. Yes ..., admittedly, as authro Steven Pinker points out in THE LANGUAGE INSTINCT, the human brain, even in early man, seems to have been "wired" to process language from birth. As Pinker explains, three-year olds sending and receiving messages seem to be aware aof the subject-predicate relationship, for example. In other words, children know early on that it is "the big dog that bites the little boy." They know, too, that it is the dog that is big. The systemic approach to the teaching of reading reinforces this basic intuition for us in complicated structures.

It may be that the holistic system fears that exposure of these hidden aspects of language will leave the learner forever processing words consciously sound by sound, syllable by syllable, or, heaven forbid, word by word. But as in other skills, like driving a car, once the parts of the car have been identified and how to use them made clear, the information sinks to the subconscious...only to rise when called upon.

The systemic approach to the teaching of reading ensures that the learner becomes acquainted with the tools of the system and how to use them.

And for the reader taught by both methods, their eyes and mind move across the pripted page unhampered by information about how it all happens. Like the surfer riding an ocean wave, unaware, in the ecstacy of free flight, that it is the hidden contours of the ocean bottom below him and the gusts of wind above that are the sources of his pleasure.

Perhaps the latent fear that the part will always dominate the whole is responsible for the reluctance of the holistic enthusiast to introduce the elements of language , their relationships, and their role. However, in my experience I have never met a student who processed words across the page individually sound by sound, syllable by syllable, or word by word after having been introduced to these parts of language and their activity. I noticed, however, that many, like me, continue to enjoy exploring, on their own the wily ways of words at work.

Ignoring the parts and activities that silently move the reader across the page can have serious consequences. The controlled vocabulary of holistic textbooks, graded to be memorized for later recognition as a whole in stories, removes the challenge and its rewards of translating new words in independent reading. YES ... the brilliant among us will discover on their own the secrets of English in action. BUT ... the rest of us may need a little prompting along the way.

And yet, in spite of the nature of language, holistic approaches reign in place. New holistic programs continue to be introduced with enthusiasm by the press. Ignored is realization that the reader MUST process a word from left to right across the page before the word can be recognized as a whole. Physical inability to follow the parade we label dyslexia.

In spite of the reality behind the definition of 'letter,' - a symbol for a significant speech sound in a language system - its role as such is kept secret - or misrepresented, as in the rime beginning "When two vowels go walking, ...

YES ... there are programs that introduce techniques of reading in literature. BUT... to interrupt the flow of sound and thought in a Shakespearean line to explain techniques makes me shudder.

...

To clarify my attitude about how we read and how we learn to read, especially for adults, I have compared the structure of an army to that of the English language. I present them both as wholes made up of parts. I leave it to my readers to see the similarity.

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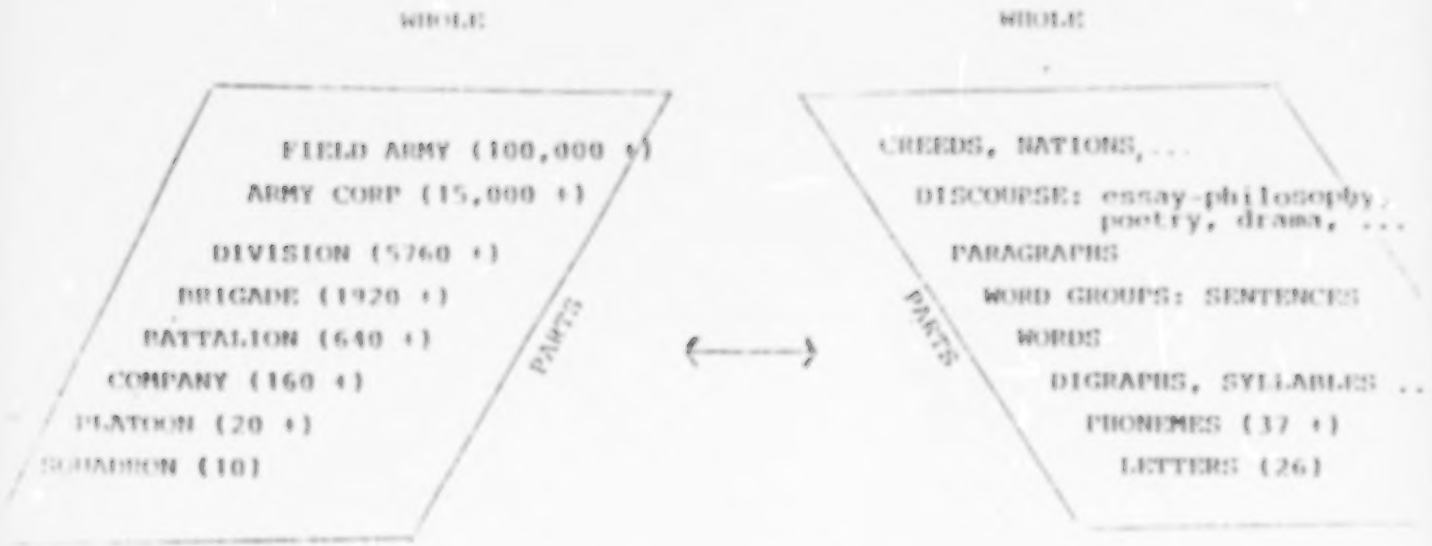

YES... like an army in battle, language in written communication consists of parts whose wholes are greater than the sum of all their parts.

BUT... to win the battle and to read with comprehension, the parts and their roles at each level of organization must be known and available in the subconscious in times of need.

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Few today are alarmed by the possible effects of the popular holistic approach to the teaching of reading and the neglect of the systemic. Yet, in light of statistics reporting our nation almost equally divided today between the literate and the illiterate for whatever reason, this phenomenon warrants our attention.

Like Thomas Jefferson, who confessed in a letter to John Adams, that he could not live without reading, I too need to read. And I want for everyone the same ability to enjoy life.

. . .

Unhappily, I see little change in the way we teach reading today since this encounter in 1951.

At a staff meeting at the New York University Reading Clinic, after our Director Nila B. Smith, author of the popular SEE and Say readers, had talked at length about the benefits of the holistic approach to our teaching of reading, I asked this question.

WHY WOULD NOT BOTH METHODS - WHOLE WORD RECOGNITION AND WORD ANALYSIS BE APPROPRIATE IN A CLASSROOM?

After nearly four decades, I still remember the embarrassment I felt in the presence of my colleagues at her response: a long, unbroken, deafening SILENCE.

. . .

Yet, if I could, I would ask her the same question today.

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DEFINITIONS

HOLISM (holistic): the view that an organic or integrated whole has a reality beyond and independent of and greater than the sum of its parts

INTERMEDIATE: the view halfway between two given points

SYSTEMIC: the view that an organic or integrated whole is based on a system of parts that affect the whole

LANGUAGE: the expression or communication of thoughts and feelings by means of vocal sounds, and combinations of such sounds, to which meaning is attributed.
Webster's 2nd Edition

systematic communication of vocal symbols ...
New Columbia Encyclopedia

primarily an auditory system of symbols
Sapir

an instrument capable of running a gamut of psychic uses Its flow not only parallels it on different levels ...
Sapir

written, is the systematic visible and permanent representation of the auditory and transient phenomena of speech
W. Nelson Francis

ASSUMPTIONS

LANGUAGE: the most important instrument we possess
Ogden and Richards

The significant elements of language are generally sequences of sounds that are either words, significant parts of words, or word groupings ... outward signs of a specific idea.
Sapir

Speech must be learned, an acquired rather than an innate skill that each individual must learn from the beginning.
W. Nelson Francis

Even those who read and think without the slightest use of sound imagery are, at last analysis, dependent on it. ...Auditory imagery is the fountain-head of all speech and of all thinking.
Sapir

The limits of my language are the limits of my world.
Wittgenstein

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REALISTIC

To enable an adult with tutor to read useful, graded material in a textbook by memorizing selected graded vocabulary and reading passages that include them.

1. (new words)
2. ... ...
   ... ...
   (review words)
3. FILL IN BLANKS .
4. USE WORDS IN SENTENCES.
5. PICTURES Puzzles

SYSTEMIC

To enable adults in small groups with leader to read current discourse of their choice by FIRST discovering language patterns, structures, and relationships within an activated program using adult abilities to listen, observe, recognize ... .

1. PROPOSITION
2. PROOF/DISPROOF of proposition and suggested steps for research
3. CONCLUSION
4. DISCUSSION
5. INTRODUCTION OF NEXT PROPOSITION with suggested steps to share results.

1. | tapes | take | sell |
   |---|---|---|
   | 1. don't | 2. goods | 3. guitar |
   | 4. I've | 5. lose | 6. arrested |
   | 7. music | 8. my | 9. some |
   | 10. time | 11. top | 12. trouble |

2. A man walked out with ten t s.

3. Some people take the tapes I sell.

1. ENGLISH WORDS HAVE A RECOGNIZABLE PATTERN OF LETTER ARRANGEMENTS.
2. Fill the three words in the box below that you think are English.

AAEIE	SVOJAC	BIAAU
KAMO	CACEIE	NAUBI
IIVAD	KENKVU	IVIEWRIIER
IOSUE	IDEVEJ	IBORRIBUIS
BIBAIR	SEACHD	IMPOSSIBUE

WRITE THOSE THREE on the lines

- ___ word made from sound intended
- ___ word made by combining two words
- ___ word made by combining foreign word parts

3. English words can be recognized by repeated patterns of letter arrangements and ways they enter English.
4. What additional ways do words enter the English language?
5. THE LONG VOWEL SOUNDS (A-E-I-O-U) are the most frequently heard sounds in English words.

   FIND words you think you hear these sounds in 300 consecutive words in an article in a discarded magazine (i.e. Large-print READERS DIGEST). UNDERLINE them.

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